

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KIEV 001157

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SUBJECT: MANAFORT ON ELECTION PROBLEMS

11. (SBU)Summary: Party of Regions (PoR) political consultant Paul Manafort (AmCit, please protect) called on the Ambassador March 21 to express his continuing concern about the possible disenfranchisement of "hundreds of thousands" of Ukrainian voters unless President Yushchenko signed into law an amendment to the election law that would authorize local courts to add voters, names to the lists on election day. Manafort cautioned that if the March 26 election did not go smoothly, any finding by the U.S. that it was free and fair would influence PoR leader Viktor Yanukovych's understanding of democracy. Manafort said his most recent data showed PoR in the lead, followed by Our Ukraine and Tymoshenko's eponymous BYuT bloc. While he did not rule out a PoR-Our Ukraine coalition after the election, he said that Our Ukraine's conduct on election day would influence PoR's willingness to consider joining ranks with Yushchenko's people. End Summary.

The Country's Mood

12. (SBU) Manafort said his polling indicated that 70% of Ukrainians wanted change, although the definition of change varied among the population. The Yushchenko government was no longer popular, and Ukrainians generally blamed it for all the problems the country faced. His polling showed that five months ago 50% of Ukrainians thought Yushchenko was trustworthy, and only 14% found Yanukovych trustworthy. Those numbers had shifted dramatically, with Yushchenko's confidence rating at 27% and Yanukovych's at 33%. Yanukovych scored higher in the public's view than Yushchenko regarding management of issues such as gas supply and relations with Russia. Ambassador noted that the key issue affecting these numbers was the fracturing of "Orange" forces following the Yushchenko/Tymoshenko split, while the "Blue" forces had coalesced around one leader. Manafort agreed and said his goal from the outset was to build Regions into a party that had a platform and policies. Doing so was important for the development of democracy in Ukraine, he asserted.

Yushchenko Trending Downward

13. (SBU) Manafort predicted that five parties would pass the 3% threshold and win seats in the next Rada: PoR, Our Ukraine, Tymoshenko's BYuT, Communists, and Socialists. According to Manafort's most recent polling data, Regions had held steady for two weeks and would likely receive 30% of the ballots cast March 26. Yushchenko's Our Ukraine was trending downward, from 20% two weeks ago to a current 17%. Tymoshenko's BYuT bloc was holding at 14%, although she could pick up Orange votes if Our Ukraine's numbers continued to decline. Moroz's Socialist party could pick up as much as 7% of the vote. Both Rada Speaker Lytvyn's bloc and former Kuchma chief of staff Medvedchuk's "Ne Tak" bloc were hovering in the 3-4% range, as was radical Progressive Socialist Vitrenko's party. Speaker Lytvyn's party was trending downward. Manafort characterized the poll's margin of error as "razor thin" and asserted that the "fraud factor" could keep Lytvyn's bloc, Vitrenko, and Ne Tak out of the next parliament.

14. (SBU) Manafort said the pool of undecided voters had dwindled to 3-4% and noted that the undecided vote would not cross between the Regions and Orange camps. Orange undecideds would vote Orange, although it was not clear if Yushchenko or Tymoshenko would pick them up. The same held true for "Blue" undecided voters, who would not drift to Our Ukraine or Tymoshenko's bloc. Manafort said that at the start of the campaign, he had thought Tymoshenko would present the greatest political threat to Regions. However, while Tymoshenko was dynamic, her campaign had no message and had not reached its potential.

Concerns for Election Day

15. (SBU) Manafort said he had two concerns for election day: fraud by Our Ukraine and the poor state of the voter lists. He asserted that Our Ukraine could "steal" up to 5-6% of the vote and had plans to conduct "carousel voting" in the west and had trained its precinct workers to implement this scam. Reflecting, he said Our Ukraine's fraud "would not affect me," because Regions was assured of a first-place showing. Instead, his concern focused on incomplete voter lists, which

he said could disenfranchise "tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands" of voters on election day. Manafort said that Our Ukraine's goal several months ago was to "cut down" Regions voters by one million people. Now he thought that Our Ukraine would reduce the number of Regions voters by 500,000 to 700,000 people. He said that entire buildings and blocks were left off voter lists. Ambassador interjected that the Chairman of the Central Election Commission Davydovych had told us the previous week that the lists were incomplete, but that it was a nationwide problem that had no regional pattern. Manafort said he was happy to hear that information, but suspected that the problems with the voter lists were greater in eastern Ukraine.

16. (SBU) Manafort predicted that voters would sour on the process if they were denied the opportunity to vote as they wished. If Regions received only 21-22% of the vote, it would still be the number one party in the Rada. Nonetheless, Regions supporters would feel like they had been "cheated again." Ambassador noted that if Regions supporters felt they had been cheated in the 2004 elections that was a bad sign. It would be a very good thing if Regions leaders stopped claiming that they were cheated in 2004. Manafort acknowledged Ambassador's point, but said he was conveying a feeling prevalent in Regions. Yanukovych himself did not care, for example, if the recent signing of the WTO bilateral between Ukraine and the U.S. was a boost to Our Ukraine. Ambassador noted that Regions campaign head Kushnaryov had indicated that he cared. Manafort said that Kushnaryov was not driving Regions policy. But Yanukovych was not bothered that the U.S. had taken this step. He was campaigning five days a week and had been doing so for the last four months. Yet, Manafort asserted, Yanukovych's campaign received little coverage by the major television stations in Ukraine; Yekhanurov received all the coverage.

17. (SBU) Ambassador reiterated that the U.S. knew there were significant problems with the voting lists. Amendments to the election law had been approved by the Rada and signed by President Yushchenko to help correct problems in election administration. Manafort said that Yanukovych knew that the USG was saying the right things, but if the U.S. would convince Yushchenko to sign another amendment that authorized local courts to add voters to the list on election day, then the U.S. would get "credit." "It would be a sign," Manafort continued, "that the U.S. puts action where others put words." If Yushchenko vetoed the technical amendment, it would be "viewed symbolically." We asked if Yanukovych and Regions were urging voters to go to the precincts and verify whether their names were on the lists, as remedies existed prior to election day to add names incorrectly left off the voter lists. Nearly all independent organizations and the GOU were urging voters to check their names on the lists, we noted. Manafort said that Yanukovych was pressing that message, but that many precinct commissions had not yet been organized. We noted our understanding that the number of understaffed precinct commissions was growing smaller since Yushchenko signed the Rada amendment to fix this problem and that many commissions had not been able to form initially because political parties, particularly small parties, had not provided their representatives in numbers sufficient to staff the commissions. Manafort did not comment.

Building U.S. Credibility

18. (SBU) Yanukovych had accepted that the U.S. wanted fair and free elections in Ukraine and knew that there "is only so much the U.S. can do," Manafort continued. But, he cautioned, if there were fraud or large numbers of disenfranchised voters on March 26 and the U.S. characterized the election as free and fair, that position would "taint (Yanukovych's) perception of what constitutes a free and fair election." Manafort acknowledged that the election system was better now than in 2004. Manafort said he had spent "a lot of time in building U.S. credibility as a supporter of democracy." Regions would receive the highest number of votes on March 26, no matter what. If Regions opponents (e.g., Our Ukraine, Tymoshenko) came into power, their government would fracture and not last for a year. And, he added, a smart opposition leader would know how to bring such a government down. Regions had been "on the verge" of moving to a "grand coalition," but now Manafort did not know what would happen after the election. Yanukovych wanted a coalition, Manafort asserted, and was willing to abide by its terms. Yanukovych believed he had a way of "trapping" Yushchenko into doing things to "live up to" a possible coalition agreement. But if election day went badly and many people were disenfranchised, or if Our Ukraine engaged in provocations, then he did not know what would happen to coalition possibilities. Manafort said that Regions had excellent sources in Our Ukraine and that he read the same election material that Yushchenko received. He had information that Our Ukraine supporters intended to masquerade as Regions supporters on election day and engage in provocations that would cause precinct commissions to shut

down the precincts. Then Regions would get the blame, and even more voters would be disenfranchised.

19. (SBU) Comment: Independent observer missions with long-term observers stationed in western Ukraine have reported no evidence of an Our Ukraine plan to use carousel voting, but we have alerted them to this allegation so they can be alert to any possible abuse. Independent media monitoring organizations also report far more balanced reporting and media treatment of candidate parties and blocs than in 2004.

Herbst